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ABSTRACT

A QUESTIONNAIRE ON GRADING SYSTEMS WAS SENT TC THE 287 MEMBERS CF THE COUNCIL CF GRADUATE SCHOOLS. OF THE 240 RESPONSES, 127 INDICATED IHAT THEY USED SYSIEMS CTHER THAN THE A-F TRADITIONAL SYSTEM, EITHER IN PART OR IN TCTC. OTHER SYSTEMS USED INCLUDE PASS/FAIL, SATISFACTORY/UNSATISFACTORY, PASS/NO CREDIT, AND SCME VARIATIONS OF THE A-F IRADITICNAL SYSTEM. RESPONSES INDICATED THAT USE OF THE LESS TRADITIONAL SYSTEM INCREASED MARKEDLY IN THE LAST 5 YEARS, AND VARIED WIDELY. IN SCME UNIVERSITIES, THE USE OF A CERTAIN SYSTEM WAS DETERMINED BY INSTITUTIONAL POLICY; IN OTHERS, BY DEPARTMENTAL, STUDENT, OR FACULTY CPTION. THE GREATEST USE OF LESS TRADITIONAL METHODS WAS IN THESES AND DISSERTATIONS, FOLLOWED BY INDEPENDENT RESEARCH, SEMINARS AND ELECTIVES. ONLY 24 SCHOOLS PERMITTED NONTRADITIONAL GRADING IN STANDARD LECTURE COURSES. LEADING ADVANTAGES CITED FCR UTILIZING LESS TRADITIONAL METHODS INCLUDED THE BELIEF THAT THEY WERE MCRE REALISTIC AND EXERTED LESS PRESSURE ON STUDENTS. DISADVANTAGES INCLUDED ADMINISTRATIVE CONFUSION BECAUSE OF A MULTIPLE GRADING SYSTEM, AND A FEAR THAT STUDENTS MIGHT BE PENALIZED IN LATER COMPETITION FCR STIPENDS. (AF)

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# GRADUATE GRADING SYSTEMS
(Revised)

Winston W. Benson, Graduate Dean
Mankato State College, Minnesota
December 5, 1969

The use of "less traditional" grading systems at the graduate level is increasing at a rapid rate with over half of the responding membership of the Council of Graduate Schools utilizing some such system. This is probably the single most important generalization to be drawn from a recent survey on graduate grading systems. Pressure for a Pass--No Credit system in my own graduate school, the limited amount of information available about the subject at the graduate level, and a request to make a short presentation at this meeting led me to make a survey of the grading systems used by members of the Council of Graduate Schools. At this point, I wish to extend my "sympathy" and appreciation to you for your cooperation in filling out "one more questionnaire."

## TERMINOLOGY

Before presenting any of the detailed results, I want to tell you of my struggle with terminology -- the search for a way to describe types of grading systems. I didn't want the terminology to discredit past practice and laud new approaches -- nor the opposite. Finally, I decided to use the term "traditional" to describe the A,B,C,D,F grading system and the term "less traditional" to describe systems other than the A-F system, such as Satisfactory-Unsatisfactory and Pass-Fail. I believe this terminology largely accomplished the purposes in mind.

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RESPONSE TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Response to the questionnaire was excellent. Of 287 members surveyed, 240 responded, 239 in apparently good humor. My questionnaire, as is frequently the case with this technique, suffered from certain limitations. Some questions proved to be ambiguous and there was considerable overlapping among them. Also, an inherent limitation exists when a single instrument is used to assess a subject in a wide variety of institutions. Finally, as most of us know only too well, busy respondents don't always complete questionnaires with total diligence. However, these limitations do not destroy the basic utility of the survey in depicting the general nature of grading systems now used in graduate schools.

Of the 240 respondents, 127 indicated they used systems other than the A-F system either in part or in whole. This replacement or supplementary system is a Satisfactory-Unsatisfactory system in sixty-five institutions, a Pass-Fail system in thirty-nine institutions, a Pass-No Credit system in eight institutions, and some other variation from the A-F system in twenty-seven additional institutions. It should be pointed out that several colleges or universities use more than one "less traditional" system.

EXTENT OF USE

A considerable number of well established graduate schools have used "less traditional" grading systems such as S-U or P-F for many years; however, there has been a dramatic increase in their use during the last five years. Only thirty institutions indicated they have used a "less traditional" system ten years or more as contrasted with sixty-six institutions who have used such a system five years or less. These figures indicate a dramatic acceleration in the adoption of "less traditional" systems.

At the risk of being redundant but in an effort to reinforce the sense of recency of adoption of these systems, I have extracted a series of quotations submitted by respondents asked to evaluate their "less traditional" system. Following are some of the comments:

"Hasn't been used long enough to assess its advantages or disadvantages."

"Not enough time to evaluate."

"Too soon to evaluate."

"This is the first year of trial."

"Too early to predict."

"Not in effect long enough to know."

"Haven't used it long enough."

"Have just started system so results are too meager to evaluate."

"Too early to evaluate - started this year."

"Too early to have any reliable information."

"The system just started this quarter, so we have no basis for evaluation yet."

"No data yet, too soon."

"System is too new - just inaugurated."

In addition to those just mentioned, several respondents said they had no "less traditional" system now but were planning one. Typical remarks were as follows:

"We likely will get to a partial Pass-Fail this coming year."

"The question of using 'Pass-No Credit' in the Graduate School is on the agenda at the December meeting."

"I hope to institute Pass-Fail system on a limited basis in a year or so."

From these selected statements and others like them it is clearly apparent that the use of "less traditional" grading systems is currently

undergoing massive field testing.

DISCRETION IN USE OF THE SYSTEM

Another item in the questionnaire asked who exercised the discretion in deciding whether the "less traditional" grading system was to operate in the grading of a particular course. Here there was a great difference in the practice as reported in the survey. Practice not only varied from institution to institution but according to the kinds of courses within many of the institutions. The largest single number of colleges or universities left its use as departmental option but almost as many followed a mandatory institution-wide policy. There were also a considerable number of institutions that left the discretion with the individual student or faculty member. Thus, practice varies markedly as to whether the use of "less traditional" grading is a uniform institutional policy, departmental option, student option, or faculty option. On a related question there was high uniformity, however. Virtually, all institutions require a student to commit himself to a given type of grading system when he registers and NOT at some later date.

COURSES OPEN TO "LESS TRADITIONAL" GRADING

Another question concerned the kinds of courses in which the "less traditional" grading system is employed. Practice varies extensively all the way from requirement of its use in all courses to permission to use it in thesis or dissertation only. As one might suspect, the "less traditional" system is used more in grading the thesis or dissertation than in any other situation with eighty-five institutions indicating they use it for this purpose. Next greatest use is for individual research other than thesis

with sixty-six universities using it for this purpose while sixty-five use it for seminars. A somewhat smaller number, forty-three, use it for electives while only twenty-four permit it in standard lecture courses in the major field.

LIMITATION AND LEVEL OF USE

The study also shows that most institutions place no specific limitation on the proportion of a graduate program that may be taken under the "less traditional" system. Inherent limitations in the nature of courses open to this type of grading usually serve as an effective limit. In the vast majority of cases, the system applies equally at all levels of graduate work although in a few cases only advanced students are eligible.

RATIONALE FOR USE

Respondents were asked to choose from five possibilities their basic reasons for utilizing this grading system. The three most often chosen are as follows: seventy-one do so "to avoid pretenses at evaluation where such evaluation is arbitrary;" twenty-seven do so "to encourage students to take work in outside areas of interest;" twenty do so "to avoid having students studying for grades and encouraging them to study for knowledge."

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ITS USE TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

In an open ended question, a great variety of reasons were given in evaluating the results of their "less traditional" grading system in terms of advantages to the graduate school. In order of importance they are listed as follows:

1. It is more realistic because it is impossible to grade fairly under the traditional system.

2. The student cannot raise his grade point average with research or thesis.

3. The system makes it more practical for a student to take work outside of his major field.

4. The pressure on faculty is reduced.

A number of disadvantages to the graduate school were also listed. In rank order they are:

1. Registrar and administrative confusion that results when a second system of grading is introduced.

2. The grade point average does not reflect the total work of the student.

3. Courses get "sloppy" and instructors evaluate poorly.

## ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ITS USE TO THE STUDENTS

A minority of the respondents reacted to the question of advantages or disadvantages to the students, but some interesting ideas were advanced. Two advantages to the students that were most often listed were as follows with the first one indicated far more frequently than the second:

1. There is less pressure on the students.

2. It doesn't confuse research grades with the academic grade point average.

Three of the disadvantages of the "less traditional" system that were listed are as follows:

1. The student may be penalized in competing for stipends.

2. The student cannot be recognized for outstanding work.

3. The student cannot improve his grade point average with thesis or research.

SUMMARY

To briefly summarize, "less traditional" grading systems are used in whole or in part by more than half of the responding institutions. Numbers using such systems have sharply increased during the past five years. Grades such as S-U or P-F are used most frequently in the thesis but are also extensively used in evaluating other research, seminars, electives, and informal courses. Leading advantages cited for utilizing these systems include the feeling that this type of grading system is more realistic and there is less pressure on the students when A-F grades are not given. Disadvantages include the administrative confusion brought on by a multiple grading system and the fact that a "less traditional" system may penalize a student competing for stipends. Interestingly enough, not a single respondent indicated that he felt it would result in less diligent student application or less learning!

No effort was made to determine if the over-riding rationale for the accelerating use of "less traditional" grading systems bears any relationship to the student unrest on our college campuses. However, in supporting their system, respondents placed heavy emphasis on the need to avoid pretenses at evaluation where such evaluation is arbitrary! Certainly the disturbed student on our campuses today is demanding that we avoid sham and pretense in all things that we do -- including the grades we assign.

This survey has revealed some interesting things to me. It will make me better able to administer the P-N supplementary grading system scheduled for my graduate school. I hope it has given you some additional insight on the use and rationale for "less traditional" grading systems at the graduate level. I recommend that the Council of Graduate Schools continue its examination of graduate grading systems at future meetings and through its committee structure.